CAUSALITY IN OCKHAM

CAROLINA JULIETA FERNÁNDEZ

In William of Ockham's philosophical and theological works, we find a widely –though non-systematically– developed reflection about the philosophical problem of causality. Causality is focused from an ontological, gnoseological, metaphysical and theological point of view. We propose to analyze this plurality as a whole, by studying the most relevant passages of Ockham's *Opera Philosophica et Theologica* concerning these topics. We intend to show the intrinsic conceptual unity that exists between all those levels, not only with respect to causality as a philosophical problem, but also as a theological one. Chapter I: *Theological and Philosophical Principles of Ockhamism*. Ockhamism is a way out to the classical problems of Christian scholastic theology according to the imperatives of medieval logic and dialectic, as they had developed in their most modern and artful way. Ockham's main philosophical problems arise from the theological frame. Thus, there's almost no theme of the ockhamist philosophy that we might adequately focus if we disregard the narrow link between Ockham's view of the problem of theology and his "terminist" or "nominalist" philosophy. He considers that a certain natural theology is possible, but only if it is reduced to a purely conceptual discourse, a kind of "science without proper object". Natural theology does not speak about something directly real –because there are no "things" distinguishable in God (attributes, etc.) or something real in common between Him and the creatures– and, despite this, it has power of significance. In an analogous way, Ockham affirms that every concept is "in the place of" the things, without having anything real in common with them. Here there are the general features of a whole philosophical and theological project, and the theme of causality is clearly inserted in it. Chapters II-VIII: In these chapters we draw the frame within which the ockhamist notion of causality appears: what we call "the ontology of *res absoluta*". This ontology rests upon the principle according to which everything outside the soul is individual. This principle is a consequence of having rejected every form of realism concerning universals. Chapter II: *The Theory of Matter and Form*. One of the main contentions of the ockhamist ontology of *res absoluta* is that matter and form are real things, while much of the rest of the Aristotelian notions concerning change –"privation", "potency", etc..– are pure names. By holding this thesis, Ockham creates the conditions to make a farther critic: he will delete the clear distinction between creation and generation, precisely because he has denied every real status to the potential existence of the form in the matter. Besides, the substantial unity is, from now, at stake: Ockham understands matter and form as really distinct, individual and merely coexistent things. But, at the same time, he tends to deny that they (i. e. matter and form) are properly causes. Chapter III: *The Theory of Change*. A second piece of the ockhamist ontology is the reduction of change to the appearance of truly new things –that is, of new individual qualities or substances (which, by the way, are the only true entities). The ockhamist doctrine of change and its principles constitutes the frame within which the notion of causality will appear. This notion has the difficult task of explaining the dynamism of a world made of radically discrete and in act entities: substances and qualities; matter and form. Chapter IV: *Teleology, Necessity, Chance and Freedom*. Ockham weakens not only the notions of "formal cause" and "material cause", but also that of "final cause". He affirms that it is a cause only metaphorically, because it doesn't properly move anything –to the point that something might be a final cause even though being inexisting. The reason is that a final cause only moves as an object of desire for the efficient cause (the only which properly moves or produces something). Though Ockham has doubts about natural teleology, his main interest is the distinction between the free or voluntary causes and the necessary or natural ones. The former might act or not, even if all the conditions that they require are given. The latter, instead, act in a (relatively) necessary way –that is, they act every time that all

the conditions that they require are given. Anyway, there is a pervasive –though widespread– scepticism all along Ockham's view. First of all, he says that final causes "can hardly be assigned" to non-rational entities. On the other hand, it can hardly be proved, in a strict sense, that something is effect of a free cause; nevertheless, he adds, we may assign freedom to what speakers call "free". Finally, with respect to natural causes, though they act in a relatively necessary way, we only know that they do it by the way of experimentation (cf. Chapter VI). Chapter V: *Causality and the Theory of Relation*. The aforementioned ideas acquire a definite consistence when we focus Ockham's view of causality as a pure relation. His theory of relation is, perhaps, the key to his ontology of *res absoluta*. Actually, he understands things not only as discrete, in act and permanent individuals, but also as absolute ones. Every relation in the creatures is a pure mental sign (now of prime, now of second intention) of absolute things. By understanding relation as non-real, and causality as a pure relation, Ockham intends clearly to deprive causality from every *de re* status. Thus, he affirms that a causal relation is not a new thing in the outside world, and that its destruction doesn't result in the destruction of anything outside the soul. Every "ability", "potency" or "virtue" in the cause is only a concept that connotes both the cause itself and another absolute thing that follows it in certain conditions. (The cause, by the way, is always something individual, because no universal might have causal powers, as far as it exists only *in anima*.) That's why, Ockham thinks, it is not necessary to pose any real multiplicity in a cause so as to explain the multiplicity of its effects. This doctrine has deep consequences, both in the physical and metaphysical level. Chapter VI: *Efficient Causality*. By his clear tendency to identify causality with efficient causality and reduce it to a relation, Ockham arrives at this definition: a cause is "a real, absolute, individual thing at which presence –if there is an approximated and well disposed patient, and if any other thing is suppressed– *may* follow another real, absolute, individual thing, and at which absence –even if an approximated and well disposed patient is given, and no matter what thing may be added–, the other thing *may not* occur". By formulating this definition, Ockham not only tends to identify causality with efficient causality, but also to understand causality in legal terms –provided that he defines it in hypothetical terms: "*if* the cause is given...*then*, etc." Besides, he underlines the importance of the "conditions". Finally, he enunciates causality in terms of possibility ("if the cause is given...then, the effect *may* occur") as a way to universal (cf. Chapter VII). Chapter VII: *The Knowledge of Causality*. So far we have dealt with ockhamist causality from an ontological point of view. We have spoken about his trend to reduce all causality to the efficient one and his conception of causality as a pure relation between absolute individual things. All these ideas must be seen in a narrow connection with his positions about how we know causality. In this level, we must take into account two ockhamist contentions. In the first place, that there cannot be knowledge of contingent propositions without intuitive apprehension of their terms. In the second place, that there cannot be knowledge of the causal potencies or attributes (*passiones*) of objects other than by experience. That's why we can't know that something is cause unless we make an experiment about the singular (*experimentum de singulari*). This consist of successively approaching and putting away an absolute thing from a patient, till we have verified that, "if the first is approximated to the patient –even if any other thing is suppressed–, then certain thing *may* occur, and that if the first is not approximated to the patient –no matter what thing may be added–, then the other thing may not occur". After we have verified this contingent proposition, we may achieve a universal one by subsuming the first to a "frequently known proposition" (*propositio frequenter nota*): that "causes of the same species may have effects of the same species in certain conditions". This principle, which epistemological status remains imprecise, may be seen as equal to another one: "if an absolute thing has certain quality or power, nothing hinders (that is to say, "it is possible that") another similar thing has a similar quality or power too". Chapter VIII: *Nature's Causal Order*. All these ideas about causality have as a result a perceptible growing of scepticism and phenomenalism, and, above all, a clear turn from an ideal of *explanation* to a model of *description*. Thus, the causal relations that, in the Aristotelian physics, were presented as necessary (e. g.,

between supralunar and sublunar world, between substances themselves, between them and their qualities, and even between their constitutive parts) became intrinsically accidental in Ockham's view. They are secure just as far as we are not able to know separately what we know that is, by right, separable. At this point, we perceive that Ockham has introduced as a decisive piece of causality –and, perhaps, with quite a new strength– to the *observer*. Chapters IX-XI: In these chapters, we intend to show the fundamental coincidence between the aforementioned ideas and the ockhamist view of causality in the metaphysical and theological level. Chapter IX: *Causality and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Due to his conception of knowledge, Ockham sees an insalvable obstacle to metaphysics of causality, which intends to give support to Christian Theology. So as to know properly that a metaphysical cause does exist, he affirms, it would have to be given to us in its factual relation to what is caused by it. But that is, by definition, impossible as far as our natural abilities is concerned. We may acquire the concept of God, but from that mere concept, we are not able (either by ourselves, or even by divine omnipotence) to derive or deduce that God is, effectively, the cause of the world. Chapter XI: *God as First Efficient Cause*. According to Ockham, we are neither able to derive from our mere concept of cause –God–, its relation to effects, nor to deduce the very existence of the cause from our knowledge of the effects. The reason is hardly forced to conclude that there's a prime efficient cause (*primum efficiens*), in the sense of a non-conditioned cause, exterior to the whole series of causes, from which the whole series depends. We are scarcely constrained to find a cause for the conservation of the world, and nothing hinders us to see it in the heavenly bodies. Chapter XI: *The Problem of God's Concourse with the Secondary Causes*. Now, if we suppose that prime metaphysical cause does exist, we aren't able to conceive it as nothing but a necessary cause –that's what the "philosophers" (the Greek and Arabian ones) do–. But if we understand it as a free one –and we do "believe" it is–, this cause might make real the potential break-up that we have discovered through the philosophical analysis (cf. Chapters II-VIII). In fact, God, as far as He's omnipotent, can make every *res absoluta* exist perfectly apart from another. For example, He can produce an accident (quality) apart from any substance, or even produce any substantial form without matter or conversely. Finally, Ockham holds, we are not able to prove that creatures don't create: this proposal of his is easy to understand if we remember the ockhamist thesis, according to which, the *terminus a quo* in generation is not really something, but *nihil*. We can scarcely persuade ourselves that they don't, because we never see that they produce something, unless a patient is present.